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THE ORIGIN OF NATIONS AND THE SHADOW OF VIOLENCE: THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CANAAN AND AMALEK

First of nations Amalek; his end is perdition.
Numbers 24:20

God of the people who conquered Canaan by storm
And they bound him with straps of *tefillin*.
Shaul Tchernichovsky, "Before the Statue of Apollo"

Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
Robert Frost, "The Gift Outright"

God said to [Moses]: "I told you to make war against [Sihon] but you offered him peace. By your life I will fulfill your ordinance. Whenever they go to war they must begin by offering peace."
Deuteronomy Rabba 5:13

On a steamy afternoon late in the premiership of Menachem Begin, I was accosted in the subway by a Hasidic rabbi-Ph.D. Casting about for an appropriate subject, he asked me what's new in *Tradition*. Searching for an uncontroversial answer, I mentioned R. Ahron Soloveichik's forthcoming article justifying Israel's operations in Lebanon. He was astonished that we would waste space justifying the invasion. I suggested that since war entails killing people, and killing is ordinarily subject to strict prohibition, waging war is not something that a scrupulous individual would treat lightly. To my interlocutor this made

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no sense. If even a war initiated for economic aggrandizement comes under the halakhic category of *milhemet mitsva* (an obligatory war), he argued, how much more so a preemptive strike against terrorist bases? He was incredulous when I informed him that the Gemara specifically excluded economically motivated war from *milhemet mitsva*.¹

Twenty years later an Israeli religious Zionist professor lectured on the biblical view of warfare. His thesis was that biblical morality in this area marked a great advance over the ethic prevalent in the Ancient Near East. Nothing in his presentation could provoke disagreement. When the lecture concluded, an earnest young man wearing a backpack came forward. Why, he wanted to know, if Judaism was so progressive in the past, does our people not take the lead in making sacrifices in order to inaugurate the reign of peace. The professor reiterated his points, but failed to connect to the uncompromising energy behind the question.

These two anecdotes represent, for me, two extremes of intuitive feeling about the normative Jewish attitude to war. The tolerant attitude towards war is that of most non-Jewish political thought throughout history. It does not regard war as an inherent evil, justified only under extraordinary circumstances. Accordingly one can derive neutral or even positive teachings about war from normative Jewish sources. When a person inclined in this direction falls into ignorance, he is most likely to err in the direction of interpreting halakha as more friendly to war than it is.

The pacific outlook, longingly expressed by the young man with the backpack, conforms to the contemporary liberal view of war. As stated by the British military historian Michael Howard, writing late in the Cold War period: "It regards war as an unnecessary aberration . . . and believes that in a rational, orderly world wars would not exist: that they can be abolished, as slavery was abolished, by a collective effort of the conscience of mankind. On the other hand it accepts that wars may have to be fought. . . ." ² When war becomes necessary, from this perspective, it is only as an act of self-defense or to defeat or prevent the infliction of some terrible injustice.

My assignment is to discuss the two examples of obligatory war that violate the liberal conscience, at least *prima facie*: the war of conquest, and possibly annihilation, against the seven nations of Canaan, and the commandment to obliterate Amalek. Yet it is impossible to discuss them in a vacuum, without reference to the question of war in general. Do the teachings of Judaism cohere, overall, with the promptings of the liberal conscience? In that case the Canaanite and Amalekite wars are

“local” exceptions to the ethical-religious rule. Or is Judaism indifferent to the liberal ethic, in which case the Jewish theology of war and contemporary “enlightened” morality are incommensurate, and the two obligatory wars are part of a general pattern? If we adopt the former alternative, the problem is why these two cases diverge from the norm. If we are convinced of the latter, it may still be worthwhile to investigate the special imperatives attached to these two conflicts, but no apologetic will succeed in bringing normative Judaism closer to the ethical intuitions of the young man with the backpack.

In the next section I will adumbrate my reasons for believing that the main thrust of Judaism is pacific rather than bellicose. This introductory discussion will provide the essential background for the more detailed analysis of the seven nations and Amalek. Even a brief sketch, however, cannot overlook the intricacy of the textual material. The sharp disputes within our community regarding the Jewish view of war result from this complexity in the biblical and rabbinic witness, though they are intensified by the ideological disorders and political upheavals of the 20th century.

I

“Joshua vs. Isaiah?” Modern Jews Read the Bible:

The casual modern reader of the Bible is struck by the ubiquity of war in its pages. Violence is as biblical as milk and honey. “Possessing the gate of one’s enemies” (Genesis 22:17), pursuing them until they “fall before you by the sword” (Leviticus 26:7-8) are divine blessings for the righteous. Prophecies of consolation to Israel, including those of eschatological intent, often contain references to the smiting of her enemies.³ Conquest and slaughter are memorable features of the book of Joshua, which has thus become a synecdoche for the bellicose theme in biblical narrative. The last example, of course, pertains to the Canaanite nations, not to ordinary warfare. Yet it is understandable that readers who are not inclined to distinguish among wars, and who are influenced by other biblical texts implying a positive view of warfare, are liable to prejudice the issue, and lump all the wars of Israel together as ingredients of a thoroughly bloody vision.

For an alternative assessment of the place of war in biblical religion it is essential to situate the texts we have just alluded to in their total theological context. An outline of the alternative vision draws on sources

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proclaiming peace as an ideal and on halakhic constraints on waging war, while also taking into account historical-anthropological factors.

The Torah's hostility to war as an ideal is encapsulated in the prohibition against constructing the altar using hewn stones: "for you have passed your sword over it and profaned it" (Exodus 20:22). God does not allow the great David to build the Temple because he was "a man of war" who "spilled blood"; this task devolved upon Solomon, whose name is derived from the root *shalom* (I Chronicles 28:3). The Messianic period is marked by the abolition of war: "one nation will not raise the sword against another, and they will study war no more" (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3). The significance of these laws and verses for biblical theology cannot be ignored.

Among the halakhot governing the prosecution of war—and for the moment we are concerned only with non-obligatory war; we will return to the seven nations and Amalek later—the most important constraint is the requirement that the sovereign solicit the approbation of the Sanhedrin and consult the Urim and Tummin.⁴ Where this is practicable, the war-making power is subject to the veto of the religious elite. For the past two millennia, in the absence of Sanhedrin and other conditions, the effective result is to outlaw all elective wars. R. Ahron Soloveichik, in the article mentioned above, went further. He argued that even wars of self-defense may require ratification by the Sanhedrin and so forth, so that justified acts of self-defense would not count as halakhic war but merely as collective self-preservation, as police actions, so to speak.⁵ This innovation may appear to be little more than a matter of terminology, and is based, in any event, on a questionable reading of Rambam's *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, but it indicates the extent to which halakhic restrictions have, in effect, imposed a pacific agenda.

For us, living at the beginning of the 21st century, when Orthodox Jewry has become popularly identified with a militant nationalistic ethos, it is difficult to imagine the contempt exhibited by champions of "muscular Judaism" towards the pacific tendencies found in the halakha. Tchernichovsky's neo-pagan lament of 1901 for the "god of the people who conquered Canaan by storm," only to be bridled and pacified by the straps of *tefillin*, is a radical, but characteristic reaction. In the late mandatory Jerusalem depicted in Agnon's *Shira*, even the laws of kashrut are despised by one character as contributing to Jewish passivity and aversion to violence:

The entire exile is the consequence of kosher meat. Had the Jews not appointed a special person to slaughter, all would slaughter, and they

would not fear a gob of blood and would not avoid defending themselves and the Gentiles would not dare to kill them.⁶

This animus towards traditional Judaism forms the backdrop to a Yiddish newspaper article published fifty years ago by R. Eliyahu Henkin.⁷ R. Henkin simultaneously confronts a double challenge. On the one hand, “adversaries accuse us of not acting in the war of the seven nations, and especially that of Amalek, in the manner of contemporary enlightened nations.” On the other hand, there are “the freethinkers who study Bible as history . . . and admire aggression and vengeance, and derive support from the Bible.” While the challenge is directed against the two exceptional wars rather than the entire institution of war in the Bible, it would naturally extend to any manifestation of excessive bellicosity in Jewish tradition. R. Henkin’s immediate concern, in this article, is that the accusation promotes anti-Semitism, implying that the harsh behavior described is indicative of the nature of the Jewish people. R. Henkin’s simple response to this charge is that the Jewish people did not act on their own in prosecuting these wars: they were commanded by God.

R. Henkin goes on to deal with another set of problems. Although the problematic commandments were fulfilled only because the command came from God, how can we be certain that the behavior they prescribe does not become paradigmatic? With the passage of time the horror inflicted only for the sake of God can become acceptable even when not commanded by Him. R. Henkin answers:

To prevent the stories told in the Bible from influencing our nature and spirit, the study of Bible comes with a *sacred melody*, and matters are stated as if in a *different* world. The nations we were commanded to make war against, according to Hazal, have become mingled with *others* and no longer exist. One cannot make inferences to others, for there is no commandment and no prophet.

Here he is making two distinct points. One is legal, pertaining to the applicability of the specific halakhot concerning the Canaanites and Amalek in our times, and will be considered below. The other is philosophical and pedagogical. R. Henkin boldly asserts that proper education alienates these biblical narratives from their original historical context. The opposition, formulated in the title of his essay, between the sacred study of the Bible and “Bible as history” constitutes an outright rejection of the secular Zionist project of reclaiming the Bible as history rather than as the ahistorical word of God.

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Superficially, R. Henkin's position is reminiscent of the approach frequently taken by Conservative Jewish scholars with a humanistic orientation. They will concede that a particular biblical passage or constellation of ideas is unacceptable to them, only to happily eliminate the embarrassment by suggesting that the Rabbis, with their more advanced moral sensibilities, interpreted away the "original" meaning of the text.⁸ This kind of reasoning is out of bounds from an Orthodox viewpoint, which treats both the Oral Law and the Written Law as true, and regards the former as the authentic frame of reference for our understanding of the latter. Hence for R. Henkin, and for us, the theological reading that hovers over the text's historicity at a low altitude cannot displace the historical reality of the mitsva as progressive notions replace primitive ideas. The *peshat* of the halakha, so to speak, cannot be detached from its significance. In his newspaper article R. Henkin is too busy combating the sinful bluster of militant nationalism to work out the precise interaction between these different levels of understanding. If, however, there is merit in R. Henkin's contention that our interpretation of these commandments, and perhaps of other features of biblical war, ascribes them to a "different world"—and I believe there is—we are not exempt from that task.

If R. Henkin preached a contemporary message of Judaism liberated from the vivid presence of real Canaanites and Amalekites, R. Kook commented on that bygone world. In a famous letter to Moshe Seidel, R. Kook states that pacifism, in biblical times, was not a live option:

Regarding war: It would have been impossible, at a time when all the neighbors were literal wolves of the night, that only Israel refrain from war. For then they would have gathered and eradicated them, God forbid. Moreover, it was necessary for them to cast their fear on the barbarians through harsh conduct, albeit with the hope of bringing humanity to the state that it ought to reach, but without prematurely anticipating it.⁹

This formulation explains not only why war is treated as a normal part of life, but can even serve as a rationalization of the special ferocity required for the conquest of Canaan.

For many of you, R. Kook's observation appears self-evident. Isaiah's vision (ch. 11) of the lion and the lamb lying down together is an ideal. Whether we take the prophecy literally, like Ravad, or figuratively, like Rambam, we believe that human nature can become surprisingly different, for the better, from what it has been in the past.¹⁰ Yet I sus-

pect that how we understand Jewish teaching about war depends not only on our hope for the future and on our analysis of the scriptural record and its context. It also depends on how we read the present. How close are we to the Messianic age?¹¹

The positive creed of those who spurned the tradition's "straps of *tefillin*" in favor of reanimating their ancient tribal version of a primeval Nietzschean self-assertion was less the glorification of war than resentment of the fact that, in a world driven by violence, Jews were condemned to play the eternal victim. Individuals like R. Soloveitchik, who are "liberal" in the sense that they do not glory in war, who have little respect for the ideas of secular nationalism, and even less desire to adopt them as a way of rejecting halakha, remain deeply suspicious of fashionable schemes and scenarios for peace in our time.¹² Militant nationalists of the secularist and neo-pagan stripe, like many others who did not adopt a consciously irreligious outlook, were convinced that the "wolves of the night" were not vestiges of the past but continuing threats. Their only reason for optimism was the hope that next time around, the Jews would be as emancipated from their moral inhibitions as our oppressors. If the scholar I encountered in the subway was careless about his use of Torah sources, it's probably because, to his mind, accuracy about these halakhot doesn't really matter.¹³ The world is a dangerous place, especially for Jews. Halakhic delicacy and theological idealism in this field are excess baggage. If one must talk (and talking is, of course, what many of us do for a living), it is more in our interest to embrace overheated rhetoric and exhortation rather than to be invaded by the cowardice of conscience. If ever a people had an excuse to think this way, it is the Jewish people in the 20th century.

The young man with the backpack, too, comes to the Bible with his own set of expectations and assumptions. He thinks that he has seen the future and that it is good. As a contemporary German social theorist puts it: "In the modernization theory of the postwar period the non-violent resolution of conflict even became a defining feature of modernity." The theorist immediately adds: "[t]his blunt rejection of violence was accompanied by a certain tendency to underestimate its importance in the present. It allowed an optimistic gaze firmly fixed on the future to view the bad old world in its death-throes with impatience and without genuine interest."¹⁴

The young man is impatient to realize Isaiah's vision of peace. Not coincidentally, it is an ideal that he can share with non-Orthodox and non-Jewish members of his socio-economic class, the modern liberals for

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whom violence is an aberration from the normal course of life, acceptable only in faraway countries of whom we know nothing, attractive only to people utterly different than ourselves. His is an attitude rooted in what Judith Shklar dubbed “the liberalism of putting cruelty first,” the aversion to the infliction of pain and devastation above all other evils. It is reinforced by vestiges of real or ersatz Christian pacifism, which includes the conviction that the Messianic age has already, in a significant manner, arrived. In the acute phrasing of the outspoken Christian pacifist Stanley Hauerwas, the point is not so much what Jesus would do, as how to live in a world transformed by his cross and resurrection.¹⁵ It is especially cherished among spiritual people who do not respond to other religious ideas, to whom eschatology beckons like a solitary star in a vacant sky. It is an attitude that diametrically counters the liberal dogma that religion bears prime responsibility for the evils of war.¹⁶

Moving back to the sources, we may venture a tentative hypothesis about the place of war in the Bible that does at least approximate justice to the variety of themes. Universal peace is the goal. Ultimate sanctity, in the here and now, cannot coexist with the symbolism of the sword and even the righteous shedding of blood. Yet war is permitted, and success in waging war is extolled. In addition to the two categories of obligatory war (*milhemet mitsva*) to which we shall turn momentarily, and the category of defensive war, there are also discretionary wars (*milhemet reshut*). These wars are subject to halakhic and moral constraints, but they are not outlawed in principle. David could not build the Temple, but it was he who prepared the way for its construction.

One halakha captures the tension between the ideal and the real in the Jewish conception of war. The halakha teaches that it is permissible to carry adornments in public on Shabbat. What is the law regarding weapons? “A man may not go out wearing a sword, or with a bow, or a shield, or a club, or a spear.” R. Eliezer disagrees on the grounds that weapons adorn the man. To which the Sages respond: “They are a disgrace (*genai*),” and prove their point by quoting Isaiah 2:4. For R. Eliezer, martial skills and weaponry are valued in the world we inhabit; arms adorn the man. According to the Sages, necessity does not translate into value. What deserves admiration is what is useful from the standpoint of the eschaton: on that day, the tools of war will have no use and no allure. The normative halakha follows the Sages; R. Eliezer is incorporated as a minority opinion.¹⁷

II

Why Are There No Obligatory Aggressive Wars Today?

The war against the seven nations of Canaan and the war against Amalek have one obvious common denominator: as a practical matter, neither is applicable today. From a theological perspective, however, it is important to investigate why that is so in each case. The crucial question is whether the barrier to conducting such a war is a consequence of (regrettable?) historical accident, or whether we should regard it as a fortunate situation, reflecting the will of God.

In addition to the Canaanites and Amalek, the Torah contains one section that singles out a particular ethnic group for negative discrimination. Deuteronomy 23:4-7 promulgates a variety of restrictions on marriage to Edomite, Egyptian, Ammonite, and Moabite converts to Judaism and their descendants; regarding Ammon and Moab, we are also commanded not to initiate peace negotiations before engaging them in battle.¹⁸

Do these groups still exist as distinct nations? The discussion in Mishna *Yadayim* 4:4 implies that Ammon no longer exists. Sennacherib's policy of forced resettlement "mingled all the nations," thus obliterating original ethnic identities. There is further discussion in rabbinic literature, continued by the medieval authorities, regarding the extent of this mingling: does it apply to Ammon alone, to all the nations, or to all of them excepting Egypt? The discussion implies that the Assyrians are not responsible for all the "mingling"; subsequent displacements accomplished or completed what the Assyrians began. Maimonides rules that none of these nations survives today.¹⁹

No classical rabbinic sources define the contemporary status of the Canaanites and Amalekites. There is no reason to assume that the confusion of nations affecting other groups failed to affect these groups. Maimonides, however, seems to distinguish between the Canaanites, about whom he explicitly states that they no longer exist as a recognizable nation and the Amalekites, about whom he is silent.²⁰ In practice, of course, neither Maimonides nor any other medieval authority can identify contemporary Amalekites.

The commandment to eradicate the seven Canaanite nations does not apply today. According to Maimonides, Amalek is alive and the mitzva is in force, at least theoretically. What exactly does this mean? One option is that the commandment indeed applies at the theoretical

level. The other nations do not exist anymore; for that reason it is logically impossible to identify their constituent members. Amalek is different: if we could identify a contemporary Amalekite (which we can't) we would be obligated to pursue fulfillment of the commandment.²¹ A much-publicized alternative approach to Rambam's view is associated with the Soloveitchik family. This view maintains that the historical Amalek no longer exists, but that the role of Amalek as a group dedicated, as a national principle, to the persecution and destruction of the Jewish people, persists. Nazi Germany, for example, had the status of Amalek.²² We shall return to this question below.

For now, let us turn to the theological significance of Sennacherib's policy. Maimonides holds that discrimination against Amalek and other ethnic groups is justified because a nation, like an individual, is responsible for its actions and thus may be punished collectively.²³ One might hold that our inability to observe these commandments today is an accident of history: there are no more Moabites or Canaanites, so the objects of discrimination are now defunct. Alternatively, one might ascribe the historical change to the workings of divine providence: if these nations no longer exist, it is because the practical fulfillment of these commandments is not part of God's plan for the post-Assyrian world.

The rationale for the last suggestion would run as follows: The commandment to limit marriage with Moabites, Edomites, and so forth, even after their conversion, makes sense when members of ethnic groups can be expected to identify totally with the mores of their respective nations. The residue of one's original identity may thus remain a factor in present life, even down to the tenth generation. The rise of empires—Assyria, Babylonia, and their successors—and the policy of mixing populations, destroys these identities and also undercuts the automatic equation of ethnic identity and individual character.

This suggestion should be borne in mind. If valid, it may be pertinent to the two cases before us. As we shall see, however, the particular circumstances of the laws regarding the Canaanites may present an entirely different set of considerations. The same may be true with respect to Amalek, whether one treats them as extinct, like the other nations, or, following Maimonides, grants Amalek a contemporary ethnic or ideological role.

III

Laws Concerning War Against the Canaanites:

Deuteronomy 20 differentiates between the obligatory war of conquest against the seven nations of Canaan and other wars. Once hostilities commence, “you shall not let a living soul survive.” According to Maimonides and Nahmanides, this is the only difference: the laws concerning the obligation to offer peace before entering into war (verses 10-14) apply equally to the Canaanites and to other nations.²⁴ Rashi appears to hold that the obligation of offering peace applies only to discretionary war but not to the war against Canaan in verses 15ff.²⁵

Several rabbinic statements seem to support Maimonides and Nahmanides. The key text (*Gittin* 46a and Yerushalmi *Shevi'it* 6:1) recounts Joshua’s peace overtures to the Canaanites before Israel crossed the Jordan. The simple meaning of Joshua 11:19 that no city agreed to peace with Israel except for Gibeon implies that this option was available to the Canaanites. The most plausible defense of Rashi is that he accepts the possibility of peace with the Canaanites but maintains that they must negotiate before the onset of hostilities; once the war with them begins, according to Rashi, it must be carried on to the bitter end.²⁶ Needless to say, the views of Maimonides and Nahmanides strike the modern sensibility as more humane, and the modified interpretation of Rashi is welcome.

The rationale for the commandment is fairly explicit: “that they not teach you to do the abominations they performed for their gods” (Deut. 20:18). *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* discerns a dual emphasis: the Torah wishes to prevent their negative example and also to inculcate, through the harsh punishment meted out, a horror of idolatry.²⁷ The former option, more explicit in the Bible, implies that the prohibition pertains in the land of Israel, the divinely ordained dwelling place of the Jewish people. The latter could be extended to all places where idolatry exists and Jewish power extends. According to Nahmanides the law applies to Canaanites in the land of Israel: this is in keeping with the first rationale cited and also fits his general emphasis on the centrality of the land. Maimonides imposes the obligation with respect to Canaanites outside the land of Israel, when Jewish conquest expands the bounds of Jewish control. This view would be consistent with both proposals of the *Hinnukh*.²⁸

R. Henkin’s blunt assertion that the applicability of these halakhot is strictly limited to the divinely ordained biblical injunctions is a crucial

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move in attempting to narrow the gap between an honest Jewish self-understanding and the promptings of the liberal conscience. Despite Kahanist distortions, it applies only to the ancient Canaanites, not to their putative modern successors. This protestation, however, carries conviction insofar as it successfully explains not only that the laws in question are exceptional from a technical legal standpoint, but that they also do not lend themselves to theological generalization. Our discussion in the previous paragraph may be helpful in two ways:

1) The liberal outlook is, in principle, opposed to ideologically motivated aggression (though in practice it is often tolerant of violence in the service of “progressive” ideals). Yet it is not without significance whether the laws regarding the ancient Canaanites are motivated, not by “secular” national ambitions, but by the spiritual imperative of eliminating idolatry.

2) The argument that this obligatory war is localized in the land of Israel constitutes a further modification. According to this approach, the Torah does not advocate imposing its monotheism on all mankind, ready or not, but insists only on creating a space in which Israel can pursue her own spiritual destiny. Something of this idea can be maintained according to the more expansive view of Maimonides, as we have seen.

Theory and Practice—the Biblical Record:

The biblical record stands at an angle to the codified law we have just surveyed. The Jews are warned repeatedly of dire consequences should they fail to eradicate the Canaanites, who will then become “pins in your eyes and thorns in your sides” (Numbers 33:55; see also Joshua 23:13). Yet the fulfillment of the commandment was evidently neglected, even in the time of Joshua, and more so after his death. To be sure, there are lovers of the Jewish people with a humanistic orientation who might be pleased at this deficiency. Thus R. Kook, who surely deplored disobedience towards God, takes comfort in the fact that they sinned by too much humanity rather than too much brutality: “Even in sin its eye was not evil towards the entire human race... for they did not annihilate the nations,” thus exhibiting “an inner tendency to seek the welfare of all human beings, which was excessive.”²⁹ The unadulterated biblical text is less charitable.

Despite severe chastisement (see Judges 2) the war against the seven nations is not rekindled, even in periods of repentance. It is as if the opportunity, once squandered, could not be recovered. The last war against the Canaanites, that of Deborah and Barak against Yavin and Sisera (Judges 4-5), is provoked by enemy oppression rather than by zeal to

resume the original war of conquest.³⁰ Is it possible that the obligation indeed lapsed after the first generations to enter the land?

Some modern scholars have toyed with such a position. It is compatible with Moshe Greenberg's "empathetic reading" of the law, grounded in three assumptions: that eradicating enemies was acceptable in ancient Israel's milieu; that the success and survival of Israel, in the opinion of the biblical authors, depended on the exclusive worship of God; and, first and foremost, that a relatively small nation, at the beginning of its path, was liable to succumb to the idolatrous culture that surrounded it.³¹ These factors mitigate the wrongness of the law, in Greenberg's opinion. As Israel becomes more rooted in the land, the security concern becomes weaker, and the law falls into desuetude.

Uriel Simon proposes to

deny the historical concreteness of the "ideal" account, viewing it as an allegory that renders palpable, for this one-time conquest, that "God makes war for Israel" (Joshua 10:14), and to express through the total *herem* the aspiration that Israel preserve itself from the bad influence of its neighbors by being "a people that dwells alone and is not counted among the nations."³²

The primary intent of Simon's allegorization is to eliminate the perceived discrepancy between the conquest by storm narrated in Joshua and the slow infiltration implied by the lack of archaeological evidence for rapid conquest. Leaving aside the question of whether such desperate remedies are needed,³³ Simon acknowledges another motive: by denying the literal sense of the biblical account (and presumably the command in Deuteronomy as well) he can avoid the "the moral distress that mass slaughter causes to anyone who is not a Kahanist fundamentalist." Greenberg condemns the Bible but forgives its authors; Simon makes peace with the Bible, while erasing the halakha. For Simon too the failure to persist in the policy of mass slaughter (assuming it ever commenced) is unproblematic.

The views of the aforementioned academicians provide background for three solutions posited by Orthodox thinkers:

R. Bin-Nun, in effect taking up R. Kook's remarks, believes that the Jewish mentality is deeply averse to war. For that reason it was necessary for God to command the prosecution of the conquest with ferocity. Allowing any room for mercy would risk a collective loss of nerve. This approach is similar to Greenberg's in appealing to the pressures of circumstance.³⁴ From this perspective we can also understand why the

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commandment is suitable to the initial period of settlement and not to later generations.³⁵ R. Bin-Nun's article does not, however, offer a halakhic justification for the lack of impetus to renew the war after it comes to a standstill.

Some years ago I attempted to develop such a justification. My point of departure was the question of *keri'a le-shalom*—the initial invitation to negotiate peace. As noted above, both Maimonides and Nahmanides apply this obligation to the war against the seven nations. Even Rashi, forced to account for the talmudic story about Joshua's messengers of peace, cannot deny some role for this concept, and therefore must concede that peace was possible at least before the Jews crossed the Jordan and was ruled out only afterwards. I therefore suggested that once the war was abandoned it could not be started up again without offering conditions of peace. What had begun as failure to obey God's command had become the inertia of an unsatisfactory *de facto* peace.

A bold approach emerges from a newly published passage by R. Kook:

If it were an absolute duty for every Jewish king to conquer all the seven nations, how would David have refrained from doing so? Therefore, in my humble opinion, the primary obligation rested only on Joshua and his generation. Afterwards it was only a commandment to realize the inheritance of the land promised to the patriarchs.³⁶

These words provide a far more robust explanation of the disappearance of the war against the Canaanites, after the rebuke in Judges 2, than R. Bin-Nun's proposal or mine. That is because it takes someone of R. Kook's stature to challenge the consensus, according to which this law is eternal. R. Kook himself immediately notes that his view appears to contradict Maimonides' decision to count this mitzva in his *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*.³⁷

Let us recapitulate the last two sections: The explicit rationale for the command to eradicate the Canaanite inhabitants of the land of Israel is the threat of their religious influence. The *Himmukh* added that the fate of the Canaanites also manifests horror at idolatry. The command was not fully executed and there is some evidence that its primary historical (and perhaps, according to R. Kook, halakhic) application was limited to the first generations of conquest. These ideas, and the detailed lines of reasoning we presented, tend to decrease the distance between the Torah and contemporary liberal reasoning on this question, without annulling it.

The Pitfall of Rationalization:

It is common to think that bringing mitsvot closer to human considerations is a good thing in itself, and that it makes Judaism more palatable to people who are uncomfortable with mystery or appalled by commandments that offend their sensibilities. If this is always true, then our previous discussion, in addition to its possible value in understanding the biblical text, also strengthens the appeal of Judaism. In our case I am not sure that this is so. Hence the ideas developed so far cannot be used as apologetic, at least not without further deliberation.

The problem is that rationalization often means explaining mitsvot in terms of human needs and desires. Doing this makes it easier to generalize to other situations. The more successful one is in promoting a rationale that makes sense, the greater the danger that the commanded war will be assimilated to the model of the ordinary aggressive war of conquest. Such a war, if it can be excused at all, is surely devoid of any religious merit.

Western expansion abounds with stories of the displacement and extermination of aboriginal peoples. The 19th century historian Theodore Roosevelt, later to achieve political prominence, wrote: "Every such submersion or displacement of an inferior race, every such armed settlement or conquest by a superior race, means the infliction and suffering of hideous woe and misery." Though he defended the displacement of American Indians on the grounds that they held tenuous title to the land in the first place, and that white men made better use of the land, Roosevelt insisted: "It was our manifest destiny to swallow up the land of all adjoining nations that were too weak to withstand us."³⁸ Most of us would judge his recognition of the horror more honest than the reasons adduced in justification.

Once we start talking this way, cynicism is not far behind. Consider a high-powered Israeli intellectual, quite liberal theologically though nominally Orthodox, who strikes the "bad boy" pose endearing to his admirers, returns the gaze of the camera and announces: "The Jewish God is stingy. His land only has room for one people, His own." (One reviewer, under the impression that Orthodox rabbis can be expected to refer to God approvingly, complained that PBS chose a Kahanist to speak for Torah!) As it is, the opinion-maker is refuted by the text: Abraham was willing to divide the land with Lot (Genesis 13); Moses pleaded with Hobab to join Israel's quest and to share in the benefits thereof (Numbers 11). If his "explanation" still resonates with an audi-

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ence, it is because he offers a reason that conforms to ordinary realistic calculation.

Professor Greenberg's empathetic reading is surely not lacking in moral gravity. Yet one factor in his analysis is the conviction that ancient Israel was driven by the belief that the exclusive worship of God is essential for national welfare. The implication is that obeying the biblical command is a matter of enlightened self-interest, rather than a commitment to God or even revulsion towards idolatry for its own sake, and not as a means to collective security. Ultimately this formulation makes the eradication of the Canaanites nothing more or less than an exhibition of *raison d'état*, albeit a misguided one not to be repeated. Of course, Greenberg is not writing from an Orthodox perspective: his goal is extenuating the Bible's wrongness, not justifying it. Orthodox thinkers who would learn guardedly from his suggestions should beware of the unintended implications.

The Orthodox approaches we noted are rooted in the halakha and posit, in varying degrees, a difference between the initial stage of conquest and later periods. To the skeptical mind, this view, too, is suspiciously close to the pressure of a nationalistic manifest destiny that pursues expansion until territorial satiation is attained and war of conquest is no longer necessary. R. Bin-Nun's approach, which is congruent with R. Kook's statements, also presupposes a psychological thesis about early Israel, namely an initial aversion to slaughter that must be overcome for the sake of survival. Naturally we do not wish to treat these factors as equivalent to secular motivations and rationalizations. We are speaking of divine command, not human invention. The moment we become glib about the various rationales, however well grounded in the sources, we risk falsifying them. We shall return to this problem at the end of our discussion of Amalek.

IV

Eternal Amalek:

The offense of Amalek is mentioned twice in the Torah. Their attack is narrated in Exodus (17:8-16), after which Moses inscribes and teaches Joshua, on divine instruction, that God will blot out the memory of Amalek "from under the heavens," and make war against Amalek "from generation to generation." Deuteronomy (25:17-19) commands Jews to remember what Amalek did and places upon them the onus of effacing Amalek's memory.

Among the multitude of vices and transgressions ascribed to Amalek in Aggadic and homiletic literature, two have a basis in the Bible.³⁹ One flows from Deuteronomy, which speaks of Amalek “happening upon you on the way, when you were weary.” This implies that the attack was uncalled for; it was not the outcome of conventional calculations of self-interest. This idea is behind the notion that Amalek is the enemy who values destruction of the Jew as an end in itself. The other is cognizant of Amalek’s descent from Esau (Genesis 36:12), the brother of Jacob, which injects the theme of fratricide. Both elements are stated by Nahmanides: “Amalek came from afar, as if striving to overcome God. . . . Also he is the offspring of Esau and our kinsman intruding in a quarrel not his.”⁴⁰

We focus on reasons for enmity towards Amalek that are somewhat grounded in the Bible because these elements will be important later on. We are not surveying the plethora of later discussions on this subject because our task is less to explain why Amalek deserves destruction than why Israel is commanded to become the agent of that destruction and what that means to us today.

Some writers seize upon the idea of an inherently and eternally evil nation, independent of their actions at a particular time, and therefore calling for extermination. The politically moderate professor of law George Fletcher finds this explanation plausible: “It is not clear whether this means that the guilt of the tribe passes from generation to generation, but that would at least provide an account of the peculiar Jewish obligation to continue the war against Amalek.” His moral verdict follows inexorably:

From the story of Amalek to the doctrine of original sin, to the birth of anti-Semitism, to the problem of German guilt, we see one baleful and pernicious line of argument. This is surely one of the most regrettable chapters in the history of Western thought. Ezekiel could rail against it, but he could not defeat it.⁴¹

Such a rationale can be applied equally to other cases of discrimination, but its employment is particularly sensitive regarding Amalek. Unlike the marriage restrictions applying to Moab *et al*, the law of Amalek entails physical extermination. And as the *Avnei Nezer* pointed out, the fate of Amalek, unlike that of the seven nations, is perpetual and does not depend on its present actions.⁴²

The *Hinnukh*, assuming a version of this theory, asks why nations are created if their fate is perdition, and stresses that their wickedness

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was not inevitable, given free will, adding that at some point in history these groups, or members thereof, served a positive purpose. Thus descendants of Amalek became great Torah scholars.⁴³ R. Henkin is not atypical when he rejects the Jewish pedigree of Nazi racism by stressing that Jews cannot arrive at such decisions on our own but only through divine command, because only an omniscient being can deliver such a judgment about an entire group.

Despite such qualifications and apologetics, the view that any group possesses an inherently evil identity that is transmitted infinitely from generation to generation cannot be recommended. Fletcher considers it a reasonable explanation for an ancient law, but there is absolutely nothing in the Bible itself that would lead one to accept it. From a contemporary moral perspective it is not an acceptable rationale. Nothing in our science tends to confirm the idea that groups of human beings differ so radically in their genetic endowment as to justify their extermination.⁴⁴ And *pace* R. Henkin, thinking that such distinctions exist, even if the thought bears no practical fruit, engenders a state of mind hospitable to homicidal racism. Why accept a rationale that is not rooted in Scripture, does not suit our science, and is conducive to the worst morality? Far better to say nothing.

A second strand of thought denies the contemporary obligation to wage war against Amalek. Professor Avi Sagi adduces Hasidic sources implying that the battle against Amalek is a spiritual one.⁴⁵ Again, it is not our interest here to examine the ideologies and vices with which Amalek is identified. Sagi, in effect, allegorizes the commandment. This approach cannot resolve our problem, inasmuch as the commandment to wipe out Amalek remains a real one, not a figurative one. R. Yaakov Medan, however, distinguishes among the Hasidic texts. Some, such as the *No'am Elimelekh*, in keeping with their homiletic agenda, indeed sidestep the fulfillment of the mitzva. Others, such as *Sefat Emet*, spiritualize the commandment rather than allegorize it. In other words, they speak of wiping out the memory of Amalek as a commandment that is literally fulfilled today through overcoming the "spirit of Amalek." The imposition of physical force, under contemporary conditions, is left to God, but requires some degree of human participation, which is not limited to physical warfare.⁴⁶ This approach is rooted in the biblical accounts: Exodus 17 presents the obliteration of Amalek as an act of God; only in Deuteronomy 25 is the commandment given to Israel.⁴⁷ It would also fit Maimonides' implicit view that the commandment has not lapsed with the disappearance of identifiable Amalek.

The flavor of the spiritualized approach to eradicating Amalek can be conveyed in the words of R. Avigdor Amliel's sermon for *Parashat Zakhor*. He contrasts Amalek, the paragon of militarism, with Israel, whose weapon is the book in which the story of Amalek is inscribed.⁴⁸ Alluding to the hopes that World War I—"the war to end war"—would spell the end of militarism, the author argues the futility of fighting evil with evil: "When Judaism declared war against militarism it was not through militarism. God said to Moses: 'Write this as a memorial in the *book*.'"⁴⁹ For R. Amliel the spiritual overcoming of Amalek is not accomplished passively, nor is it achieved by countering violence with an undifferentiated conception of love: "whoever would be merciful, must first be just, and if he would begin with mercy, he will ultimately lack it and instead display cruelty."⁵⁰ Contrasting, in effect, the Christian gospel of love with the Torah's ideal of exorcising the culture of violence, R. Amliel's pacific interpretation of the commandment to destroy Amalek yet holds fast to the original vigor of the divine word.

The idea of a war fought by God with minimal human involvement resonates through several biblical texts. I omitted these sources from our prior discussion about the biblical attitude to war because they do not play a large role in contemporary Jewish thought. Christian pacifists, however, have exploited this theme in arguing that the Hebrew Bible anticipates their position.⁵¹ The first evidence for this theme is Moses' promise, before the parting of the sea: "God will make war for you, and you will be silent" (Exodus 14:14). On other occasions the outcome of a war is determined by divine agency, without significant human intervention: such is the war of Jehoshaphat against Moab and Ammon (II Chronicles 20). The famous paradigm of such a victory is Hezekiah's defense of Jerusalem against the Assyrians (II Kings 18-19; Isaiah 36-37).⁵² The same is true of the eschatological "Gog and Magog" prophecies. Here the great foe, representing an assemblage of nations not otherwise associated with enmity towards Israel, invades after the people are restored to their land. The extensive examples of this type of prophecy (Ezekiel 38-39, whence the names Gog and Magog derive; Zachariah 14; Joel 4) depict God Himself as the agent of destruction. Interestingly, while Ezekiel and Zachariah describe a gory battleground, in Joel the projected war does not actually occur: God "roars from Zion" and the response is silent submission.⁵³ Thus we have one irenic eschatological scenario in which ultimate bloodshed is finally averted.

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At first blush, this model of divinely initiated warfare has affinities with the inward war against Amalek suggested by the Hasidic texts. As we shall see, the story is a bit more complicated.

Uncovering the Amalek in Edom:

In this section I wish to present a hitherto unnoticed theological aspect of Amalek. As already observed, Amalek is descended from Esau. Insofar as the nomadic Amalekites dwelt separately from Edom, the Bible does not refer explicitly to this kinship: the only geographical coincidence of the two groups is the battle at Mount Seir during the time of Hezekiah (I Chronicles 4:43ff).⁵⁴ Later Jewish literature, of course, frequently connects them. The later literature also identifies Edom with Rome, and Amalek with the Roman Empire and its successors. To the historical factors proposed by scholars to explain this development, one might add the nature of the prophecies, which seem excessive if applied to a minor regional kingdom.⁵⁵ I submit that the severity with which Edom is judged in some narratives and prophecies has to do with the genealogy of Amalek. If this is true, then certain unique characteristics of the prophecies against Edom may offer a clue about the theological role of Amalek.

The first text where Edom exhibits extraordinary hostility towards the Jewish people is Numbers 20. Here the Israelites, on their journey to Canaan, request passage through the land of their brother Edom. The king of Edom responds with threats of war backed by full mobilization. R. Soloveitchik once suggested that the extreme hostility of the king of Edom is symptomatic of Edom's symbolic function as a "metaphysical" opponent of Israel. That is to say, Edom here fills the role ordinarily served by Amalek.⁵⁶

Some of the prophecies concerning Edom are not unlike those regarding its neighbors, though some of these castigate Edom especially for betraying its fraternal relation to Jacob or for exploiting the destruction of Judah to expand its territory.⁵⁷ Our current interest is in two unusual prophecies, Isaiah 34 and Obadiah. The placement of Isaiah 34 is distinctive. It does not appear in the portion of the book devoted to prophecies concerning the nations (chapters 13-23), but together with the prophecies of redemption that follow Isaiah's last series of prophecies about the Assyrian attack and precede the narrative part of the book.⁵⁸ The brief book of Obadiah is dedicated in its entirety to the theme of Edom.

Isaiah 34 and Obadiah share one remarkable characteristic. In both prophecies it appears that all nations are summoned to render judgment on Edom. At the same time, it is unclear whether Edom is judged separately or as part of a larger congeries of nations. Thus Isaiah 34 invites all the nations to witness the divine indignation against all the nations. Only in verse 5 does attention shift to Edom: "For my sword is satiated in heaven; it descends upon Edom." From this point on, Edom is the exclusive object of God's wrath. Obadiah presents a similar profile. The first verse calls the nations to rise up against Edom,⁵⁹ while the last section (verse 16ff) includes the other nations in the punishment: "As you have drunk upon my holy mountain so shall all the nations drink perpetually; they shall drink, and swallow, and become as though they had never been."⁶⁰

Approaching these prophecies with the equation Edom=Amalek in hand, we face two problems. One pertains to the spiritualization question that arose in the previous section. Obadiah's prophecy definitely insists upon Israel's agency in vanquishing Edom and establishing the kingdom of God: "Then saviors shall arise on Mount Zion to judge the Mount of Esau; and the kingdom shall be God's" (v. 21). In Isaiah 63:1-6, God marches alone against Edom, and in an echo of the prophecies just cited, He complains about the lack of help: "I have trodden the winepress alone, and of the peoples none was with Me. . . . And I looked about, and there was no helper, and wondered there was none to uphold." This fits the Amalek-model set down in Deuteronomy, where obliterating Amalek is a commandment upon Israel. It differs from the "Gog and Magog" model, which is compatible with human passivity, and stands in sharp contrast to the Hezekiah-Jehoshaphat model, where God is the sole agent of war.⁶¹ Again, we are forced to conclude, on halakhic grounds and now on literary grounds as well, that the final triumph over Amalek cannot take place without human activity, even if the primary victory is God's.

Let us now confront the paradoxical content of these prophecies: the simultaneous sense that Edom-Amalek is the object of judgment, with the nations of the world serving as either spectators or partners in the "coalition of the willing," on the one hand, and the implication that these prophecies target for punishment that very collection of nations, on the other hand. The simplest solution to this paradox, in my opinion, is that the nations as a whole deserve the unmitigated measure of the divine fury, but that in actuality it is only Edom-Amalek that absorbs the full blow. In the language of Isaiah 34, God's indignation is directed at all the nations, His sword is satiated with blood, but the sword descends only on Edom, the people subjected to "my *herem*" (34:5).

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Against this background, the story of Amalek is more than an ancient episode inexplicably magnified and amplified so that its evil reverberates down through the corridors of recorded time, an evil never to be silenced until its perpetrators are extinguished. The original offense of Amalek, the particular nature of which we only glimpse through a fog of exegesis and homiletic, stands for a fundamental and radical enmity between God and the entire social-political world of the nations. It is an estrangement that would justify, in principle, the universal *herem*, which the last of the prophets, in the closing moments of prophetic utterance, offers as the dread alternative to eschatological reconciliation (Malachi 3:24). The divine wrath is not expended on the whole of violent, rebellious humanity, but only upon Amalek.

The approach adumbrated here, on the basis of our reading of these prophecies, does not dispense with the classic discussions about the exact nature of Amalek's transgression. These attempts at interpretation and rationalization remain untouched. However, our approach tackles the problem of proportionality: why long ago wickedness remains such a central part of our consciousness and a presence, albeit a shadowy one, in the halakhic corpus. Our answer is that the specific acts and motivations of Amalek are symbols of perpetual temptations to violence and betrayal that will continue to infect the lives of nations until they are eradicated.

As a genuine solution to the problem of Amalek this answer is unsatisfactory, whatever its coherence with the prophetic themes we excavated. It fails on moral grounds. A moment's reflection reveals that the process whereby general guilt is transferred to an individual or group within the collective has a name. The object of this process is called a scapegoat.⁶² The psychological equilibrium achieved by denominating a scapegoat often makes it a necessary process if the collective is to survive its burden of well-deserved guilt. All things being equal, it is best that the scapegoat be the member of the community most deserving of the stigma and the penalty. Nonetheless, the institution is morally reprehensible. If our discussion has merely replaced Fletcher's specter of racially transmitted guilt with that of a sociologically sanctioned disproportion, have we gained anything morally?

My revered teacher R. Aharon Lichtenstein once wrote that the obligation to destroy Amalek, in its full scope, "cannot be explained or justified by any standard of natural ethics. It can be legitimated only by being anchored in divine command and obedience." This brought a rebuke from an eminent Jerusalem rabbi. As quoted by R. Lichtenstein,

the critic insisted that the extermination is indeed ethical, insofar as it is required by the norms and considerations of a divine morality transcending our feeble understanding. Granting the cogency of this formulation, R. Lichtenstein persisted, was not the gap between them a mere matter of semantics. And his critic replied that from an educational standpoint terminological variations are highly significant.⁶³ In this exchange the primary concern was apparently ensuring respect for the moral integrity of God's word.

The present essay awakens deeper worries than those that motivated R. Lichtenstein's reflections. For we have advanced partial explanations and justifications in full knowledge of their unsatisfactory quality. This is true of suggestions regarding the war against the Canaanites that smack of *realpolitik*; it is even more so with respect to an analysis of Amalek that ascribes to the mitsva an orientation that would deter emulation if attributed to a human agent. In the final analysis it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it is morally and religiously preferable to regard the command to eradicate Amalek, and perhaps the commandment regarding the seven nations, as laws without rationale, justifiable only from the standpoint of *Deus dixit*. Anything else either cheapens the word of God or degrades human moral judgment. It is not my intention to dispel the mystery—nay the terror—which we experience in confronting these halakhot. My only extenuation is the hope that our long discussion helps us to define the mystery and the terror as precisely as possible in the light of the sources.

V

The Full Harshness of the Terrifying.

Over thirty years ago Professor Eliezer Schweid published an article that deserves more attention than it has received.⁶⁴ Meditating on the challenge earlier posed in the name of George Fletcher, Schweid denies any relationship between the Torah's teachings with regard to Amalek and the Canaanites, on the one hand, and Nazi theories of race, on the other hand. Although rabbinic sources ascribe moral qualms to Saul, and Martin Buber made of the deposed king a fount of moral protest against the halakha, there is no hint of such criticism in the Bible itself. In the biblical view, there is nothing wrong with the kind of comprehensive punishment meted out to these nations. That is because the Bible grants God the untrammelled and unqualified moral authority to

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dispose of nations according to their deserts, even to their destruction. Amalek and the seven nations of Canaan are “sinners in the hand of the Almighty God,” but so is Israel. In the aftermath of the golden calf, God decrees the destruction of the Jewish people, and if they disobey Him in His land, they too will be swept away, “as [the land] vomited the people who were there before you” (Leviticus 18).

Exonerating Judaism from the charge of racism and genocide, says Schweid, does not guarantee a comforting message. He writes:

Surely this does not make the commands and the acts that derive from them less terrifying or less problematic in contemporary eyes. To the contrary, perhaps it is precisely thus that we finally confront the full harshness of the terrifying, and the exact nature of the problem.⁶⁵

If our analysis so far has done so little to alleviate our profound moral discomfort with the halakha, it is because we have evaded the full pressure of Schweid’s problem. We must therefore confront the terrifying nature of God’s claim on man, within the context of these laws. Only then can we attempt a provisional reconciliation with the teachings of Judaism.

The conflict between the norms of Judaism is stark and terrifying. On one side, God claims everything. There is no place hidden from His authority. Over against this lies not only the humanistic demand for autonomy, but the theological principle, deeply embedded in the same Torah, which proclaims divine mercy. The tension between these great experiences is as familiar as Rashi’s commentary to the first verse of the Torah: God wished to create the world in accordance with the attribute of judgment; knowing that the world could not withstand it, He employed the attribute of mercy as well. As religious individuals, we experience the two opposing attributes of God, *middat ha-din* and *middat ha-rahamim* (judgment and mercy) not only in the pages of books, but also in the most intense moments of our lives.

Schweid’s article emphasizes the attribute of judgment because it is the absolute severity of God that is most troubling to us and that comes to expression in the laws of obligatory war. Further analysis uncovers a pattern in the interaction of *din* and *rahamim*. Just as creation is inaugurated with *din* (through the divine name *Elokim*) and continues in the mingling of *din* and *rahamim* (the combination of the Tetragrammaton and *Elokim* in chapters 2-3 of Genesis), so the history of God’s interaction with His world is marked by the thunderclap of judgment, modified by the tidings of mercy. The first ten generations of humanity

culminate in a divine judgment of virtual extermination, followed by God's promise never again to visit humanity with such all-consuming punishment. As the Rav *z"l* observed more than once, total commitment to God entails the legitimacy of human sacrifice. God demands this seemingly absurd cruelty of Abraham. After the Akeda the severe claim of divine judgment is not transcended—the absoluteness of the divine imperative is not done away with—yet the practice of human sacrifice is banished from the cult. Moses too is confronted on his way back from Midian (Exodus 4:21ff) by the wild charismatic numinous presence, a terrifying crisis almost incomprehensible to our later perspective.⁶⁶ After Moses' intercession, God reveals to him the thirteen attributes of mercy (Exodus 34), with their promise of forgiveness that has remained the cornerstone of our pleas ever since.

All beginnings are mysterious, and the most intimate origins are the most mysterious of all. Hazal (*Hagiga* chapter 2) designated the study of such matters esoteric. We commonly subsume under this category the mystical study of cosmological origins and ontological foundations. However, the Yerushalmi includes *arayot*, defined as the mystery of incest at the root of human reproduction. A sense of horror and fascination underlies our repressed awareness of the intimate secret at the heart of our human origins, whether it is expressed in terms of the practical necessity of allowing the first man's children to cohabit with one another, lest the race perish, or in terms of the Freudian family romance. We do not plumb the depths of these matters in public, out of concern for the honor of God and in order to draw a veil of concealment around the necessities of our own history.

The commandments to which this essay is devoted, the war of conquest in ancient Canaan and the eternal war against Amalek, touch upon the hidden mysteries of our religious and social existence. The two great horrors: idolatry, the betrayal of our Creator, and the ideology of violence and fratricide. The war to conquer Canaan is the war to construct a Jewish society, in the land allocated to us by God, free of the presence of idolatry. Amalek, as we have seen, represents gratuitous violence (“happening upon you on the way”), the primeval rebellion against the divine order of history. Let us not forget the other biblical theme marked by Nahmanides: Amalek's attack on Israel was an attack against his brother. It is worth noting that the primal act of murder in the Bible was Cain killing Abel; only after the Flood does the Torah condemn homicide as a universal offense against the image of God in man. To this very day, when the full horror of murder strikes us, we are

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haunted by the blood of Abel: murder is of the brother, not the other.⁶⁷

God's "original" plan, as it were, was to create the world under the attribute of judgment. Judgment is not withdrawn; it is only tempered by mercy. The conquest of Canaan by storm was not repeated. The second conquest of the land, the one that was never annulled, occurred through settlement: "not by arms and not by force, but through My Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts" (Zachariah 4:6). The struggle against an Amalek who is no longer permanently identifiable with any ethnic group is conducted primarily through the book.

To achieve, as individuals and as a community, an authentic and faithful balance between the commandments of harshness and the life of loving kindness is a frightening but unavoidable task. Without the constant awareness of *middat ha-din*, without faithfulness to the real and frightening demand it imposes upon us, our commitment to the worship of the one holy God and His ethics of life deteriorates into sentimentalism and wishful thinking about our own spiritual state and that of the world. Absent the knowledge of *middat ha-rahamim*, the "sweetening" of the original imperative, cloaked in all its numinous fascination and terror, our purported obedience is corrupted into a feral willfulness. According to the Midrash I cited as an epigraph to this essay, Moses took the initiative in offering Sihon peace. God went beyond commending him for it and inscribed his practice as the eternal halakha.⁶⁸ Hazal had a lesson to teach here, though, despite all the good will in the world, it is one that cannot be applied by rote.

The intellectual task of fully understanding these components of Judaism is even more forbidding than the practical aspects. To gaze upon the hidden wellsprings of these halakhot, and contemplate unblinking the mysteries they encapsulate, is not an enterprise for the faint of spirit. Singing of "the gift outright," Robert Frost rhapsodizes about America's possession of, and by the land. He is not oblivious to the moral and existential cost: but Frost makes his acknowledgement *sotto voce*, placing the telltale line "The deed of gift was many deeds of war" in parentheses. There is wisdom in his choice. For us, pursuing not the secular vision of occidental "manifest destiny" but the possession of God, the shadow side of our battle against evil must be bracketed even as it is recognized. It must be bracketed because the risk of giving one subsidiary element undue importance in our religious life and thinking is too great. At the same time it must be acknowledged, first of all because otherwise we would be suppressing a real ingredient of our religious outlook, but also because we would be evading the work of *heshbon ha-nefesh*, our responsibility to engage in self-examination.

R. Yehuda ha-Levi (*Kuzari* II, 36ff) wrote that Israel among the nations is like the heart among the human organs, the most sensitive and therefore the hardest. Battered by the feral willfulness of radical national self-assertion and lured by the oppressor's face disguised behind the mask of piety, we are commanded to avoid emulating the nations of Canaan whom God expelled from the land, and to remember Amalek, for the disappearance of whose legacy we must strive. Thus we are to live waiting for that day when "God will be One and His Name will be One" (Zachariah 14:9).

NOTES

1. See *Sanhedrin* 16 and *Berakhot* 3b. I had no Gemara with me in the subway, but recalled that the *Ya'arot Devash*, a copy of which happened to be in my bag, cites it. My interlocutor, however, declined to look in the book. With an air of embarrassed reticence he reminded me that the author of *Ya'arot Devash*, R. Yonatan Eyebeschütz, had been the subject of various accusations and therefore (!) his talmudic quotations could not be relied on. Perhaps this was just as well: the volume I pressed on him skips the crucial line I wanted.
2. Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 3. Howard distinguishes the liberal view from conservatism, which regards war as inevitable, and Marxism, which maintains that it can be eliminated only after the destruction of the established social order (11). One may be a liberal in the normative sense of condemning unnecessary military action, without being a liberal in Howard's political sense, which has to do with human nature and institutions. The young man with the backpack is a liberal in this sense too. This may be why his conversation with the lecturer was unsatisfactory. My use of the adjective "liberal" in this essay varies with context, and usually refers to both concepts of liberalism.
3. See, inter alia, Isaiah 13-14; 47; Ezekiel 25ff; 38-39; Nahum; Zachariah 14.
4. Mishna *Sanhedrin* 1:5; Bavli *Sanhedrin* 16a; Rambam, *Hilkhot Sanhedrin* 5:1.
5. R. Ahron Soloveichik, "Waging War on Shabbat," *Tradition* 20:3 (1982), 179-187; p. 181-183.
6. S.Y. Agnon, *Shira* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1974), 306.
7. "Study of Bible in Sanctity and Bible as History," in *Kitvei ha-GRTE Henkin* Volume I (New York: Ezrat Torah, 1980), 211-213. Citations on 211.
8. See, for example, Moshe Greenberg, "The Use of Rabbinic Midrash as an Educational Resource in Studying the Book of Joshua," in *Ha-Segulla ve-haKo'ah* (Haifa: Oranim, 1985), 11-27. As I note below, Greenberg's approach is subtler than my reference here implies.
9. R. Avraham Y. Kook, *Iggerot ha-Re'iyah* I (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav

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- Kook, 1943), § 99, p. 100. See also the letter published in his *Maamrei ha-Re'iyah* (Jerusalem 1984), 508. Bernard Stahl called to my attention the passage in *Shemona Kevatsim* (Jerusalem, 1999), II 280-1 (Notebook 5, section 177).
10. *Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:1.
 11. R. Kook himself can be mobilized on both sides. On the one hand, he fervently believes in the imminence of redemption and considers his age to be one of progressive social consciousness. On the other hand, in his well-known essay "War" (in *Orot*) he regards World War I as an engine of eschatological progress and accepts participation in future wars as a natural corollary of Israel's return to political life. Among R. Kook's proclaimed spiritual progeny the messianic message can also be inverted, as proximity to the pinnacle of history justifies the militarism consummating it. See Elie Holtzer's paper for the 2004 Orthodox Forum, "Attitudes to the Use of Military Force in Ideological Currents of Religious Zionism."
 12. Tsevi Zohar, *He'iru Penei ha-Mizrah: Halakha ve-Hagut Etsel Hakhmei Yisrael ba-Mizrah ha-Tikhon* (Jerusalem: Kibbutz Me'uhad, 2001), 309 and 426 n 26, awards a gold star to R. Hayyim David ha-Levi for citing the existence of the UN as a sign that the world is edging closer to the Messianic ideal of international peace. Zohar deems it interesting that R. Soloveitchik, in *Kol Dodi Dofek*, implies that the only good the UN has done is to preside over the foundation of the Israeli state. It is indeed an instructive contrast.
 13. On some egregious misreadings of sources in the name of militant Zionism, see Yitzchak Blau, "Ploughshares into Swords: Contemporary Religious Zionism and Moral Constraints," *Tradition* 34:4 (2000), 39-60.
 14. Hans Joas, *War and Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Blackwell, 2003), 31. Later in the book (112) Joas maintains that Americans prefer to imagine bloodless wars because of the overwhelming traumatic memory of the Civil War. This seems odd to me, as 20th century Europe bears a much heavier and more recent burden of mass slaughter. Is it not possible that the purported American inclination to see wars in antiseptic terms derives precisely from the fact that, except for the Civil War, this country has been unaccustomed to mass victimization?
 15. "Stanley Hauerwas and the Editors on 'In Time of War,'" *First Things* (February 2002), 11-15; p. 12.
 16. On the contemporary attractions of pacifism, see my "Flowing Upstream: Reflections on Reading Gandhi at Yeshiva," *Torah u-Madda Journal* 10 (2001), 60-68; on contemporary images of religion vs. secularism with respect to war, see my "Is Religion a Primary Cause of War?" *Torah u-Madda Journal* 11 (2002-3), 35-49. Note that the view I am describing here is *not* pacifist (rejecting war) but pacific, placing a high value on peace and advocating exceptional effort and risk in the hope of attaining it.
 17. Mishna *Shabbat* 6:4. See R. Kook's commentary *Ein Ayah to Shabbat* chapter 6 §§ 43-45.
 18. Whether the law about offering these nations peace applies after the generation of Moses is discussed by Ramban, at the end of his objections to Rambam's *Sefer ha-Mitsvot, Negative Commandments*.
 19. See Tosefta *Yadayim* 2:8 and analysis of *Tosafot to Megilla* 12b s.v. *zil* and

- to *Yevamot* 76b s.v. *minyamin*, inter alia. Maimonides is at *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'a* 12:25. For exhaustive documentation on this subject, see *Otsar ha-Poskim, Even ha-Ezer* 4. Assyrian exchange of population was intended to weaken ethnic cohesion. This could be achieved by partial resettlement. On this policy see M. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974).
20. *Hilkhot Melakhim* 5:4. In *Sefer ha-Mitsvot, Positive Commandments*, he explains at length why the non-existence of Canaanites does not undercut the eternal status of the commandment, explicitly making a contrast with Amalek. *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* 528 (end of *Parashat Shoftim*) rules, against Maimonides, that the obligation applies today to any identifiable remnants of the Canaanite nations.
 21. See R. Moshe Sternbuch, *Mo'adim u-Zemannim* II (Jerusalem, 1968), § 164. See also Elliott Horowitz, "From the Generation of Moses to the Generation of Messiah: Jews Confront 'Amalek' and His Incarnations" [in Hebrew], *Tsiyyon* 64:4 (1999), 425-454.
 22. See, for example, *maran ha-Rav* Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek in Be-Sod ha-Yahid ve-haYahad* (Jerusalem: Orot, 1976), 392.
 23. *Guide* III, 41. The deterrent element in Maimonides' formulation is in keeping with the general tenor of his theory of punishment as presented in this chapter.
 24. *Hilkhot Melakhim* 6:1; Nahmanides, Commentary to Deuteronomy 20:10 and to Numbers 21:21.
 25. Rashi to Deuteronomy 20:10. Rashbam to 20:16 rules out a peace initiative but allows Israel to respond positively to Canaanite overtures as in the case of Gibeon.
 26. The large literature on Rashi's position includes Mizrahi and Gur Aryeh *ad. loc.*, *Lehem Mishne, Hilkhot Melakhim* 6:1, Hazon Ish *YD* 157:2.
 27. *Hinnukh* 425 (*Va-Ethannan*).
 28. See *Hilkhot Melakhim* and Hazon Ish. See also commentary in *Rambam la-Am* p. 380. Compare *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 7:1.
 29. *Ein Ayah* 2:300, §115.
 30. Rashi interprets as a reference to Deuteronomy's law about the seven nations Deborah's statement to Barak that God has commanded him to fight (Judges 4:6). Malbim says that she is conveying her own prophecy, not Moses', regarding God's will for the present situation. Either there would be no need for a prophetic word to remind Barak of an ongoing halakhic duty or there was no such immediate obligation.
 31. Greenberg, *Ha-Segulla ve-haKo'ah*, 19.
 32. Uriel Simon: "Post-Biblical and Post-Zionist Archaeology," in Israel L. Levine and Amichai Mazar: *Ha-Pulmus al ha-Emet ha-Historit ba-Mikra* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2001), 135-140; p. 139 (reprinted in Simon's *Bakkesh Shalom ve-Rodfehu* [Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2002]).
 33. In his essay "The Bible in Historical Perspective and Israelite Settlement in Canaan" in the same volume (3-16), R. Yoel Bin-Nun observes the obvious: two versions of Israel's conquest of Canaan are already evident in the Bible itself—Joshua depicts a chain of almost unbroken victory, while Judges testifies to the very limited success achieved. He suggests that con-

- quest is often punctuated by initial, sweeping triumphs, followed by a long, frustrating period of protracted resistance. A glance at the daily newspaper confirms the plausibility of his view.
34. Y. Bin-Nun, "The Book of Joshua: *Peshat* and Rabbinic Statements" in *Musar, Milhama ve-Kibbush* (Alon Shevut, 1993), 31-40. See also Joshua A. Berman, *Narrative Analogy in the Hebrew Bible: Battle Stories and their Equivalent Non-Battle Narratives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 47-48. According to Berman, with the exception of chapter 8, which he attempts to explain on other grounds, the narrative of the conquest in Joshua avoids presenting the perspective of the Canaanites, in order to "objectify" them and deny them humanity. This insight is consistent with the view that participation in the enemy's subjective experience would undermine the will to war.
 35. The notion that rugged extraordinary measures are appropriate at the inception of the conquest may be reflected in the injunction of *herem*, the total destruction of property, after the first campaign at Jericho (Joshua 6). I believe that this idea can shed light on the strange position taken by Nahmanides regarding the destruction of Arad (Numbers 21:1ff). He maintains that the Arad mentioned in the Torah is identical with the Tsefat mentioned in Judges 1. Both towns are destroyed by the Israelites and renamed Horma. Offhand there is insufficient reason to make the equation. After all, the original names are different, the interval between the time of Moses and that of Judges is substantial, and the name Horma, meaning a place totally destroyed, would fit any site subjected to such devastation. In my opinion Nahmanides found troubling the savagery of Israel razing the city to the ground. The case of Jericho, of course, could be justified as the opening campaign, which would warrant self-denial on the part of the warring nation. The vow to subject Arad to the *herem*, according to Nahmanides, resulted from Israel's inability to respond immediately to the attack launched by the Canaanite king of Arad: for that reason they vow to treat the capture of Arad, when that occurs, as a religious sacrificial war and not as an ordinary conquest. The *herem* of Tsefat, however, has no apparent rationale. Hence Nahmanides may have been impelled to conflate it with the story previously narrated in the Torah. In a recent conversation (6/25/03), R. Bin-Nun concurred with my proposal. For a complementary perspective see R. Tsevi Schachter, "Pearls of Our Master," *Bet Yitshak* 37, 43f.
 36. R. Kook, *Tov Ro'i, Sota* (Jerusalem, 5760), §8, p. 22.
 37. One could resolve this difficulty by suggesting that the eternal commandment, according to Maimonides harmonized with R. Kook, is to inhabit and govern the land of Israel. Only in the first generations would this entail the eradication of the Canaanites. My suggestion would find a place for *yishuv erets Yisrael* according to Maimonides, an omission that has troubled many commentators. Unfortunately it really doesn't fit Maimonides' language.
 38. The discussion of Roosevelt and quotations from his works are derived from Warren Zimmermann, *First Great Triumph: How Five Americans Made Their Country a World Power* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002), 219ff.
 39. For the range of vices symbolized by Amalek, see R. Yaakov Medan, "Amalek," in *Al Derekh ha-Avot* (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2001), 316-397.

40. Nahmanides, Commentary to Exodus 17:16.
41. George Fletcher, *Romantics at War: Glory and Guilt in the Age of Terrorism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), quotes from pages 144 and 147.
42. *Avnei Nezer*, YD II § 508.
43. According to *Mekhilta*, end of *Be-Shallah*, we do not accept Amalekite converts. Nonetheless, the rabbinic statement cited above implies that such converts existed. In any event Maimonides omits this prohibition (see Rambam, *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'va* 12:17). *Avnei Nezer* argues that Amalekites must be allowed to convert, since even the Canaanites, who are guilty of widespread idolatry, have that opportunity. For later discussion of the *Mekhilta* passage, see Sagi, cited below, 338 n. 49.
44. On this issue, see, for example, Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1996). C. Turnbull, in *The Mountain People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), imputed to the African group he studied, the Ik, such moral insensitivity (which he ascribed to relocation followed by ecological disasters inculcating, over generations, an irreversible and thorough selfishness) that they must be dispersed forever. His work, once popular among philosophers, is now considered highly unreliable. See most recently, R. Grinker, *In the Arms of Africa: The Life of Colin M. Turnbull* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001).
45. Avi Sagi, "The Punishment of Amalek in Jewish Tradition: Coping with the Moral Problem," *Harvard Theological Review* 87:3 (1994), 323-346.
46. See Medan, "Amalek," 317-396, n. 40 for his extended discussion of this point *contra* Sagi.
47. It is revealing that Sagi (p. 323) remarks on the fact that "even" God is occupied with the obliteration of Amalek, while a consecutive reading of the Torah starts out with God's oath and then promulgates a human obligation.
48. R. Avigdor Amiel, *Derashot el Ammi*, III (Jerusalem, 1935), chapter 14: "Sword and Scripture," pp. 132-143.
49. *Ibid.*, 134.
50. *Ibid.*, 135.
51. See, for example, John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994).
52. See also *Eikha Rabba*, Proem 30 and R. Eliyahu Dessler, *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* (Jerusalem, 1963), I 201.
53. On the imagery of Joel 4:15-16 see Meir Weiss, "On One Biblical Metaphor," in *Mikraot ke-Kavvanatam* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1987), 27-86; original appearance *Tarbiz* 34. I have dealt with this entire issue in greater detail in my lectures on Joel.
54. We are not concerned here with the exclusion of Amalek from the halakhic category of the "children of Esau." See Nahmanides to Genesis 36:12 and R. Yehuda Gershuni, "On the Mitzva of Eradicating Amalek," in *Kol Tsofayikh* (Jerusalem, 1980), 437-438.
55. A standard article is G. Cohen, "Edom and Rome," in A. Altmann, *Biblical and Other Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964). E. Horowitz's article in *Tsiyyon* 64:4 contains updated material on these identifications. Louis Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait of Jacob," *JQR* 79, 130-133

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- maintains that the identification of Edom and Rome is as early as Josephus.
56. My allusion is based on the Rav's annotated manuscript of this lecture on *Parashat Hukat*. In support of his thesis, one may note the radical contrast between the bellicosity expressed in Numbers and the command in Deuteronomy 2 to avoid provoking "your brothers the children of Esau who dwell in Seir." The two narratives can be harmonized in a variety of ways, most plausibly perhaps, following Rashbam's view distinguishing the kingdom of Edom from the inhabitants of Seir. Whichever explanation is adopted, the difference in tone is remarkable. It appears that Numbers and Deuteronomy have different goals in narrating these episodes. In Deuteronomy the point is either that God has provided a homeland for the neighbors of Israel as He has for us, or that the reason Israel did not conquer their territory was a specific prohibition rather than divine weakness, as it were (see Nahmanides and Seforno *ad loc*). In Numbers, according to the Rav, we confront the eternal hostility of Edom=Amalek.
 57. See, for example, Amos 1; Jeremiah 49: 7ff; Ezekiel 25 and 35; Malachi 1.
 58. In this Isaiah 34 is similar to the second, more specialized prophecy against Edom in Ezekiel. Chapter 25 is placed within the prophecies concerning the nations section (chapters 25-32). Chapter 35 is among the prophecies of redemption (34-48).
 59. Cf. Jeremiah 49:14 and note slight differences.
 60. The second person probably refers to Edom, who had celebrated the destruction (Targum; Rashi; Radak). The punishment is that their merry intoxication will become a drunken stupor. According to Ibn Ezra, the prophet is addressing Israel: as they had drained the bitter cup (see Jeremiah 25:27ff and 49:12), so will those who rejoiced at their plight.
 61. On the fundamental difference between "Gog and Magog" and Amalek, see R. Kook, *Olat Re'iyah* I, 232.
 62. Though I have arrived at this analysis independently, there are obvious parallels to the work of René Girard, e.g., *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1977).
 63. R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "Halakha and Conduct as Foundations of Ethics: Theoretical and Educational Reflections," in *Arakhim be-Mivhan Milhama: Ethics and War in the Light of Judaism—Essays in Memory of Ram Mizrahi* (Yeshivat Har-Etzion, 1985), 13-24; quote 23f.
 64. Eliezer Schweid, "The Annihilation of Amalek and Eradication of the Amorite," *Moznayim* 33 (1971), 201-209.
 65. *Ibid.*, 206.
 66. In the Rav's work this idea is most lucidly expressed in his *The Emergence of Ethical Man* (Jersey City: Ktav, 2005).
 67. See Genesis chapters 4 and 9. That fratricide ("the voice of the blood of your brother") rather than the "Kantian" transgression against humanity, is central to the original murder, was pointed out by students in my Honors "Genesis and Literature" course Yeshiva College, Fall 2003.
 68. Commentators on *Midrash Rabba* were troubled by the nature of Moses' initiative. If his action was in conformity with Deuteronomy 20, he was simply following the law. If not, how is his initiative justified? In the narrative order of the Torah, the law of Deuteronomy 20 had not yet been promulgated at the time when Moses encountered the Amorites (Deut. 2=Numbers 21).